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Guidance and Counseling Issues in South Africa's Non-Racial Schools

Joyce Hickson and Donna Pascoe

Guidance teachers and school counselors in non-racial schools in South Africa need to assess the relevance of their services for individuals from different cultures. The importance of providing relevant cross-cultural guidance and counseling in school settings has been underscored by numerous empirical studies which indicate that traditional psychotherapy and counseling are often inappropriate for meeting the needs of culturally different clients. Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (1993) assert that despite recognition that cultural diversity requires multicultural rather than monocultural counseling practices, the systematic study of cross-cultural communication only took root in the late twentieth century. Only recently has the term "counseling" entered the South African lexicon and traditional fields of application such as psychiatry, clinical psychology, and social work have tended to represent mental health services. Since counseling services have entered the existing model of psychological services only in the last decade the terms "psychology" and "counseling" will be used interchangeably. Because there is a gross under-supply of mental health services there is considerable overlap in the roles of psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and counselors.

The need for cultural-sensitivity training has received increased attention over the past two decades (Ivey, 1987; Marsella & Pedersen, 1981; Pedersen, Draguns,

Lonner & Trimble 1981; Triandis 1994). Pedersen (1996) observes that counselors who lack cultural sensitivity, knowledge, or awareness and who fail to account for cultural differences may contribute to cultural oppression when working with minorities and non-mainstream clients. In the last two decades, numerous books and articles have been published highlighting the need for equipping practitioners so as to benefit people from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. In their book, *Multicultural Counseling in a Divided and Traumatized Society: The Meaning of Childhood and Adolescence in South Africa*, Hickson and Kriegler (1996) specifically describe issues and concepts of cross-cultural counseling and their implications for the South African context.

Recognition of the Problem

The crux of the problem, as perceived by mental health providers, is that practitioners traditionally employ a western, white, Anglo-American orientation, and psychological services have mainly been the privilege of the self-motivated, highly verbal social elite. Consequently, traditional psychology must be viewed as inappropriate for a third world country like South Africa because it is imported, de-contextualized, and non-African. Moreover, many professionals in South Africa (Dawes, 1986; Lazarus, 1986; 'Psychology in Society' (editorial), 1983, 1986) are becoming

increasingly aware of the structural determinants of problems experienced in the South African apartheid system and the need to place psychological services in their wider socio-economic, political and cultural context. Accordingly, a number of researchers (Abdi, 1975; Biesheuvel, 1987; Hammond-Tooke, 1974; Holdstock, 1979) assert that western psychology is inadequate for use with third world clients in that: (a) it operates primarily within the individualistic paradigm, which may often exclude family and community involvement; (b) it adopts a Eurocentric or western theory of human reality, which is far removed from the African experience; and (c) it focuses on adapting people to their environment, which in an apartheid system can promote a type of learned helplessness.

Following from these basic tenets, several researchers have identified ways in which mental health services are irrelevant for many black people in South Africa. The potential conflict inherent in guidance or counseling delivery services is that both are incompatible with the thinking, behavior, life-style, spiritual dimension, life experiences, and reality of black communities.

Because of the mismatch between western psychology and a third world environment, guidance and counseling theory and practice in South Africa are said to reflect not only the counselor's encapsulation in a bourgeois ideology, but an alienation from working class clients who are being serviced (Cloete, Pillay, & Swart, 1986).

Other major characteristics of counseling that may act as impediments to helping third world clients have been suggested. For example, clients are expected to engage openly and expressively in personal discus-

sion, with ensuing insight, in the confines of a dyadic relationship. The counselor-client relationship invariably emphasizes a monolingual orientation with the expectation that clients speak standard English, and is traditionally an unstructured, permissive and ambiguous relationship. Moreover, according to Vontress (1969, 1970, 1971, 1979, 1983) the hidden agenda of most western helping processes includes a belief in the distinction between physical and mental well-being, as well as a belief in a cause-and-effect relationship.

Furthermore, the literature on cross-cultural communication has given attention to various racial and ethnic factors which may act as barriers in the cross-cultural helping process. These obstacles incorporate the ideas that the culturally diverse client may be unfamiliar with counseling and, therefore, view it as an unknown, mystifying process. As a result, he or she may be reluctant to self-disclose. The counselor, too, may impede effective helping by being caught up in his or her own culture and, consequently, be ignorant of, or insensitive to, the client's cultural background. In any cross-cultural guidance or counseling encounter, it is probable that sex and race taboos, language barriers and class-bound variables will operate to undermine the establishment of trust and rapport between counselor and client. Accordingly, research by Sue and Sue (2002) has shown that third world clients tend to underutilize mental health services. Due to the influence of western variables which serve as potential sources of conflict in cross-cultural work, practitioners are encouraged to examine and evaluate the relevance of the particular framework, or psychology paradigm, from which they operate and, inevitably, impose

on their clients. Three paradigms have predominated in western psychology: psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and humanism.

Psychoanalysis views human behavior in the light of unconscious factors and motivations, biological and instinctual needs, as well as psychosexual events occurring during the first five years of life. In contrast, behaviorism looks at the world from a stimulus-response foundation and contends that an understanding of the dynamics of reinforcement contingencies is what is needed to explain most human behavior. Finally, humanistic psychology is a reaction to the determinism of psychoanalysis and the mechanism of behaviorism and asserts that human behavior is a function of conscious personal and interpersonal free choice and commitment. These three ways of viewing human behavior have been criticized for not describing adequately individuals who fall beyond the western, white, middle class, Anglo-American framework. For instance, the focus on the self is criticized, since in many societies the family, state or society is considered the psychosocial unit and not the individual. In addition, the exclusion of the supernatural fails to recognize that Africans generally believe in supernatural and ancestral causations and influences on human existence.

A New Frame of Reference

There is an urgent need for practitioners to be aware of the cultural roots of psychology, and that they view their clients through the unique language of their own theories. It has been said that the theory and practice of psychology in South Africa reflects the counselor's encapsulation and lack of cross-cultural competencies. Rather than being enveloped by culture, counselors

need to structure the counseling process according to the client's cultural frame of reference. This may incorporate a belief system and value orientation widely different from the counselor's own.

Counselors working with culturally different clients are urged to take full cognizance of their own values and to be aware of their clients' values, since major differences in world view could impede the functioning and effectiveness of mental health providers. Research by Ibrahim (1985) indicates that differences in world view between counselor and client in the counseling relationship may result in: (a) a breakdown in communication between counselor and client; (b) a tendency of counselors to attribute negative judgments to their clients; (c) counselors being harmful rather than helpful in the counseling process and outcome; (d) frustration and anxiety for both counselor and client; and (e) the choice of inappropriate goals and methods in the counseling situation.

Finally, as indicated by Sue (1996) counselors who tend to respond according to their own conditioned beliefs, values, assumptions and perspectives of reality, with total disregard for differences in world view, are said to be engaging in a form of cultural oppression.

Acquiring Cultural Awareness, Knowledge and Skills

Each individual, including the helping practitioner, presumably functions from a culturally determined context that includes values, beliefs, life-styles, problem-solving and decision-making modes. Numerous literature reviews on intercultural communication suggest that the process and successful outcome of counseling is significantly

increased as a result of the practitioner's cross-cultural insights. The process of increasing a counselor's sensitivity to cultural issues may be divided into three areas: awareness, knowledge, and skills.

Awareness

In the helping encounter, counselors and guidance personnel need to have an awareness of who they are and of their own values and predispositions. Culturally effective communication requires that personal world views, cultural contexts and biases be recognized, assessed and accepted; as an initial starting point, it is vitally important that school practitioners be in touch with their own 'cultural baggage' and prejudices. An examination of how factors in their own lives have impinged on their own professional philosophy, as well as how these factors have been translated into actual practices with their clients, should be acknowledged. An awareness of personal limitations and biases when working with persons of other ethnic groups should be acknowledged, and such an awareness should be part of an ongoing appraisal for guidance practitioners, with referral occurring when necessary.

Ideally, therefore, when interacting with culturally diverse clients, guidance and counseling personnel in a non-racial school setting would apply a culturally pluralistic philosophy, and refrain not only from the imposition of culturally dominant beliefs but from attitudes of paternalism and condescension as well. Practitioners who disregard cultural variables and impose their own world view reflect cultural encapsulation, whereas culturally effective counselors are aware of their own identity, yet able to share the world view of their clients without negating its legitimacy.

Knowledge

Cross-cultural literature also suggests that knowledge of a culture is an essential ingredient of cross-cultural effectiveness. If guidance personnel are to broaden their perceptual field and enhance their understanding of divergent world views, they first need to gain relevant knowledge and information about the special population groups for whom their services are designed.

Information about various ethnic groups can be drawn from a wide range of sources, including social science textbooks, ethnic literature, popular magazines, print media, television and personal sources.

A useful framework for the assessment of the large-scale environment which can also enhance understanding of the culturally different client has been proposed by Triandis (1980). It includes the following variables: (a) *The ecology*: awareness of the physical environment, resources and geography; (b) *The subsistence system*: methods of exploitation of the economy to survive (i.e., agricultural, fishing, gathering, industry); (c) *The socio-cultural system*: institutions, norms, roles and values as they exist outside the individual; (d) *The individual system*: perception, learning, motivation, subjective culture; (e) *The interindividual system*: patterns of social behavior, including child-rearing methods; (f) *Projective systems*: systems embodied by myths, folklore, etc; and (g) *Interaction patterns*: patterns occurring between the individual and the environment. Since cross-cultural knowledge includes a knowledge of individuals in their wider context – cultural, social and political – Triandis' model provides a fruitful avenue of exploration (Triandis, 1980).

Once the helping practitioner in a South African non-racial school has gained a cognitive understanding of cultural groups, an understanding of the client's experience or phenomenological world becomes the most important source of information. How the individual who is seeking help specifically represents the world must be understood. For example, although individuals of particular ethnic groups may have convergent world views in certain respects, that world view is also mediated by such factors as gender, age, education and socio-economic levels. Consequently, in addition to ethnic factors, how the client personally views the world – his or her own individual world view – must be understood before the helper intervenes to produce change. For the guidance practitioner, the three areas of cultural awareness, knowledge of the client's general cultural system, and special client world view, must be considered. Such factors are critically important determinants of the counseling process and outcome.

Skills

Guidance and counseling personnel should not only be sensitized to racial and ethnic perspectives, but should also be made aware of approaches which are culturally encapsulated and ethnocentrically biased. Value and attitude differences between cultures must be acknowledged and understood, although with the 'cautionary emphasis' that cultural differences should not be accentuated to such a degree that 'stereotyping' becomes a negative consequence. Instead, 'culture-specific' techniques which focus on the humanistic and universal aspects of each individual should instead be employed and translated into an improved quality of service delivery.

Although knowledge of a client's culture does not in itself produce counselor effectiveness, counselors in non-racial school settings should also be open and flexible enough to change their approach in order to meet the needs of the diverse clients they serve. This may require that guidance and counseling personnel develop and utilize non-conventional assessment skills. The available tools and techniques in the school may not be appropriate for clients from a different culture. Multi-method approaches instead may be needed to assess the capabilities, potentials and limitations of the ethnic client.

Four barriers that may be experienced in cross-cultural counseling have been identified by Tucker, Chennault and Mulkerne (1981), who describe four effective strategies for overcoming them as well:

1. Negative attitude toward seeking counseling

Strategy: emphatically acknowledge the client's fears and channel his/her thoughts towards active problem-solving.

2. Defensiveness and fear of self-disclosure

Strategy: be aware of, and openly acknowledge, counselor-client socio-cultural differences, and resulting problems.

3. Expectations of therapeutic failure

Strategy: maximize the client's involvement and self-esteem.

4. *Feelings of discomfort during therapy*

Strategy: relax the client by addressing his or her discomfort and by self-disclosing feelings about working with him/her.

There is probably no situation in counseling in South Africa that evidences as clear-cut a need for an accepting and non-judgmental attitude as the interaction between counselor and client of difference races, cultures and socio-economic levels.

Conclusion

Guidance personnel in South African non-racial school settings should integrate cultural learning into a broader, universal context. Helping processes that recognize cross-cultural variables, but that transcend culture, will result in improved service delivery to ethnic clients. Increasing cross-cultural effectiveness depends on helping practitioners in the school setting becoming sensitized to the three areas of cultural awareness, knowledge and skills. As personnel learn to integrate cultural learning, while also using a broader universal perspective, they can expect to view the world from a more comprehensive and less culturally limited perspective. A proper cultural understanding will not only facilitate the helping process, but will result in a more meaningful encounter for the client served as well. The applicability of these new strategies for South Africa hold great promise for accommodating children of different cultural backgrounds and socialization and such strategies can serve as a model for a post-apartheid education system. Guidance and counseling programs should be devised with a particular emphasis on a non-racial school setting. It is

mandatory that school counselors, counselors and psychologists in South Africa be aware of all the cultural, racial, religious and socio-economic interplay within the school and community, carefully considering both when servicing and making efforts to provide a pluralistically equitable education for students.

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